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Accountability in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Vladimir Putin vs NATO

Abstract

This paper showcases a discursive peace psychological analysis of Putin's declaration of war and NATO's subsequent response to it. By treating psychological categories as action-bound and occasioned, rather than cognitive features residing inside the minds of individuals, the analysis shows three rhetorical strategies used by Putin and NATO to manage their accountability in the context of initiating hostilities. First, both sides describe the events in a way that combines factual and moral reading of them that favour them. Second, continuity is rhetorically established to justify the actions of both factions as rooted in their pre-conflict status rather than being seen as reacting to the war. Finally, both sides use threats and exhortations for others to act in accordance with their wishes and demands. These three strategies showcase how both sides rhetorically manage their accountability, moral rightness and, at the same time, work up the moral guilt of their opponents. Similarity between literature on expressions and denials of prejudice are found here, in the case of discursively sanitising military action. This, more broadly, is a part of analysing discursive violence in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war: how language can be used to justify or challenge violence.

Keywords: Russia, NATO, political communication, accountability, discursive psychology, peace psychology

Introduction

On 24th February 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of a “special military operation” in Ukraine. Although not a formal declaration of war, it is not far from it (Pullen & Frost, 2022). In response, NATO, the day after, released a statement condemning the Russian invasion. This article focuses on how these two sides justify and account for their actions in the international public domain, portraying their respective positions as morally appropriate. My aim is to explore the language of justification and condemnation – that is, who is held accountable for the war – of hostilities in the Russo-

Ukrainian war. Particularly, how the escalation of hostilities is rhetorically framed, by Putin and NATO, in a context that results in widespread suffering, displacement, and death on account of Russia's escalation of hostilities.

War, truth & values

The act of “telling the truth” is much more than that. It is to make an ideological claim. When speaking of ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ one can readily observe that these claims are designed to do a particular thing – such as challenging one’s political opponent (Demasi, 2019). These ‘versions of truth’ present a moral, ideological, perspective. This is not to say that the speakers or institutions they represent lie. The point is not to spot or avoid untruths (i.e., fact checking), but to argue which truths are relevant. To this end, what is relevant is not only what is covered but also how it is expressed. There is a longstanding understanding in academia that communications matter. However much research tends to treat language as a window to the mind (e.g., Dyson & Parent, 2018; Semenova & Winter, 2020), something that discursive psychology, the approach adopted here, takes serious issue with (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Tileagă, 2013). Rather, language tells us something much more valuable that is psychologically relevant without needing to guess at people’s inner mental states. I cover some examples of this in the next section but suffice to say for now that people deploy psychological concepts in talk to attend to any number of actions. What is of particular interest here is the notion of accountability; who is held responsible for the hostilities in Ukraine in the speech by Vladimir Putin and in NATO’s response?

In the context of international conflict, each side, unsurprisingly, present their position as the morally correct one – and this construction takes a discursive form (McVittie & Sambaraju,

2018) – such correctness must be embedded in rhetorical truth work. That is, how does one construct their position as being real. So how does one determine which side is ‘speaking the truth’? This is where the problem of post-truth lies, especially when people in public facing articles, talk shows and such, attempt to get at the mental states, motivations, or other factors inside the minds of various politicians – particularly when said politicians make controversial statements or moves. One can readily find examples of how people try to make sense of controversies by looking to the minds of politicians for explanations (see above)¹. What is the point of claims that are highly contestable? Are they indicative of a particular type of psychological profile? This type of reductionism assumes thoughts drive actions, but such a top-down mentalised approach gives us only one side of a multifaceted psychological phenomena (Billig, 1996). I echo of Billig’s (2002) point that ideology lies in our actions and not in our thoughts. It is to this action – observable as behaviour; in our case discourse – we should look to for answers.

I have previously argued (Demasi, 2020) that we should focus on what people *do* with the act of truth-telling rather than to check whether the claims are “factually accurate” – to explore, for example, what exactly makes truth-telling comes across as that. ‘Truth’ does not determine how people speak (Gibson, 2018c); what is more relevant is the context and function of a given interaction. The notion of an “absolute truth” is tangential to such considerations; measuring the accuracy of what people say, or treating their talk as an accurate reflection of an inner mental state, is not a fruitful approach because so much of the actual nuance and complexity of opinions is missed (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). One cannot counter and end irrational or prejudiced arguments by mere fact checking – facts, I argue (Demasi, 2019), are used as

¹ This is also more widely observable in cognitive psychological research, and majority of political psychological research tends to focus on the so-called inner mental life of individuals.

“rhetorical means to rhetorical ends” (ibid., p. 18). All versions of truth are discursively (Potter, 1996) and conceptually (Feyerabend, 2010) embedded within a particular framework for making sense of the world; as such ‘knowledge’ is a tool for political communication (Tileagă, 2013).

It is for this reason why Western countries and Russia, especially in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war that began in 2014, are at odds. Both sides have their own means of making sense of the conflict². Aside from political considerations – is Russia looking to aggressively re-establish the past Soviet sphere, has NATO aggravated Russia by expanding East since 1991? and so forth – there are different ways that this war, and its wider political perspectives, are made sense of. This sense-making, I argue, is discursive. Discourse is the medium through which such sense-making takes place (Demasi, 2022) and “political phenomena do not exist outside communication processes” (Tileagă, 2013, p.165). This sense-making, furthermore, is carried out through the discursive constructions of ‘truth’, which, in turn, have rhetorical implications for who is treated as responsible for the Russo-Ukrainian war.

In the case of this war, and Russia’s current political relationship with the rest of the Western world, this point is important to bear in mind. It is neither fruitful nor accurate to try to get at the mental state of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and try to assess whether he has or has not lost his grip on reality (e.g., Borger & Chrisafis, 2022). This misses a more immediate point. His talk, just as anyone’s talk, does not reveal his mental state, nor is a window to truthfulness (Gibson, 2018c). Instead, we need to look at what he is doing with his political discourse. The same point applies to wider political discourse, particularly in the context of war and conflict discourse (see Gibson, 2018b), including NATO’s response. Politicians who

² Although we should not assume a uniform consistency across the board with this. For example, demonstrably, many Russians oppose the war (e.g., Walker, 2022).

are ideological opponents hardly expect to persuade each other, and public communications appear often more designed to be a shot at political enemies. What, then, is the point of such communications?

Discourse is action oriented (Edwards & Potter, 1992). That is, we do things with our words and utterances rather than use them to pass information regarding our mental states. This is particularly the case when looking at how people make something come across as true (see Potter, 1996) – detail of description matters, no matter how incredulous the claims might be (see Wooffitt, 1992). These communications and other political moves – such as Russia threatening referendums in the occupied Ukrainian territories (“Moscow-administered”, 2022)³ – should be understood, in a wider sense, as rhetorical actions. Their very existence suggests some need to justify said actions. Were this not the case, then “mere” military occupation and silence on the matter would suffice. What we can see is that in the context of international conflict the factions at odds need to justify their actions to each other and to the wider (inter)national public. This justification, as I say above, is discursive and rhetorical and that is the site we should look to for understanding said justifications rather than the minds of political leaders.

Political discourse & discursive peace psychology

Discursive and rhetorical psychology have a long history of engaging with political discourse (e.g., Billig 1991; Condor, Tileagă & Billig, 2013). As such, it is particularly well suited to unpacking political discourse as a practical matter. In this paper, this takes the form of justifying and condemning the Russo-Ukrainian war but there is scope for further work (e.g.,

³ A threat since realised.

rhetorical construction of referendums to join Russia – by both Russians and international responses or the articulation of threats over time). This is a part of the wider discursive peace psychology (Gibson, 2018b) agenda of trying to understand issues of peace and conflict and contributes to the growing discursive studies into the study of mediated politics (see Tileagă, 2013).

The aim of discursive peace psychology (henceforth DPP) endeavours to move away from an individualistic understanding of peace psychology, favouring instead to critically look at constructions of peace and violence (and the wider implications of them) in discourse (Gibson, 2018b). In this sense, DPP allows us to understand matters of peace and conflict through a more integrated, wider, lens; especially in the study of discursive violence (Gibson, 2018a). Discursive violence “pertains to those uses of discourse that function to sustain or legitimise violence” (ibid., p.325). In the context of arguing for peace or war in the international arena, DPP highlights the contestable nature of ‘peace’ – it means different things to different factions, and these varying versions tend to favour the in-group arguing for their own version of peace (McVittie & Sambaraju, 2018). Indeed, a singular understanding of notions such as ‘peace’ or ‘violence’ is untenable because these are bound up in each side’s understanding of them (ibid.). It is more analytically fruitful, then, to “show that talk of peace and violence is routinely aimed at justification, criticism, and lack of progress” (ibid., p.117).

In psychology more widely there is a tendency to assume that psychological phenomena are restricted to what goes on inside one’s mind, and that one can use indirect observations, such as discourse, as means to access and assess such thoughts. As Billig (1996) argues, this is not a flaw but it misses a great deal. What we should be looking into, especially in public-facing communications between Russia and NATO, is to the rhetorical and ideological action of such discourses. DPP is a fruitful approach to political communication that appreciates what these

discourses are doing, in a social and political psychological sense (Demasi et al., 2021; Tileagă, 2013).

We need to appreciate how these arguments are made and recognise them as such, as opposed to being “mere reflections” of something else. From a discursive psychological (DP) perspective, the saying “less talk, more action” does not make sense. All talk is action, and we ought to recognise that political communication as doing some sort of action. DP can tell us what these actions are. Trying to find something behind or beneath the political language of the Russo-Ukrainian war misses a more obvious point. Public discussions of political events involve managing accountability for the event in mind (Tileagă, 2010), and allow for an “ideological reading that downplays alternative dimensions of accountability” (Tileagă, 2013, p. 180). The point is that the communications are designed to do something political, ideological, and rhetorical in front of an international audience, and these communications routinely deploy the psychological language that discursive psychology explores.

The original contribution of this paper, then, is in looking to how psychological categories in talk are used to perform political, ideological, action in the context of justifying and condemning war – discursive violence – in the international stage. Understanding ideology to be rooted in action rather than thought (Billig, 2002), what we should be asking, rather than trying to understand the minds of politicians, are questions of the following type:

- How are these communications constructed?
- To what end are certain claims constructed as true, or undermined as true?
- How are psychological concepts deployed in talk to these ends?

The point of the questions is not to concern ourselves with the dilution of truth. Post-truth, as understood today, can be understood more as a rhetorical strategy of political communication

of our times (Demasi, 2020) rather than a decline of truth in and of itself. If facts are rhetorical (Demasi, 2019) and not bound to a particular type of political communication (Burke & Demasi, 2019), then what values and action do these facts advocate? Why and how might politicians, on all sides of the Russo-Ukrainian war, portray ‘truth’, ‘facts’ and their broader arguments in a particular way that advocates their ideological positions?

Method

Because the aim of this study is to look particularly at Putin’s speech and NATO’s subsequent response, to explore the justification of war in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, I have adopted a case study approach – common for some discourse analytic approaches (Goodman, 2017). This guided the process of looking for data, with the aim being to find publicly accessible statements from Putin and NATO. Putin’s declaration of a special “military operation” (extracts labelled ‘Putin’) was drawn from two news websites: Bloomberg UK (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24>) and The Spectator (<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-putin-s-declaration-of-war-on-ukraine>). These are English translations of the original Russian, delivered 24/02/22, with the Bloomberg UK version being of higher quality English, but transcripts were cross-referenced with each other for clarity. The NATO response (extracts labelled ‘NATO’) was drawn from NATO’s website (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_192489.htm) which was released a day later. This article was made available in four languages (English, French, Russian and Ukrainian), with the analysis drawing from the English version.

The choice of drawing the data from English sources is a practical matter, I am not fluent in Russian. The matter of translation warrants a brief note. Putin's speech was delivered in Russian, but the analysis relied on an English translation of it. By necessity much of the original nuance has been lost, such as the use of more religious tones and other idiomatic, slang, phrases. For the present, however, the English translation of Putin's speech must suffice, but we should not forget that to be able to fully appreciate the rhetorical complexity and nuance of Putin's speech an analysis of the original Russian, with a fluent understanding of Russian, may well be a fruitful way forward.

The analytic approach draws from discursive (Edwards & Potter, 1992), rhetorical (Billig, 1991), and discursive peace psychology (Gibson, 2018b). This means that the aim is to recognise the action-oriented nature of discourse, treating talk as attending to a particular sort of action – in this instance on how Russia (via Putin) and NATO account for their respective actions and who, or what, is treated as responsible for the war. This action is to be found in the discourse rather than treat the discourse as a medium to something else, be it inner mental states or some such. Ideology is 'lived' (Billig, 2002; Wetherell & Potter, 1993), meaning that its expression is often frenetic, often contradictory, and generally shifting. This is what enables them to be heard in the first place (Billig et al., 1988); this nature of talk and discourse, from a DP perspective, treats these inconsistencies as objects of analysis rather than theoretical stumbling blocks to be overcome.

Accountability is one of the cornerstones of a discursive psychological approach, the other two being an analytic recognition of discourse as action-oriented and orienting to issues of fact and interest (see the discursive action model in Edwards & Potter, 1992). All three of these orient to discourse as doing something, and being presented as a neutral, reified, matter. Particularly

when it comes to accountability, speakers treat themselves as responsible, or vice versa, for what they are saying and their own agentic state within their discourse (ibid.).

At a practical level, the analysis proceeded along the lines recommended by Edwards and Potter (1992) and Goodman (2017) where applicable – identifying appropriate data source for analysis, collecting data (in this case, a case study), preliminary reading of data (including data sessions with peers), coding data based on similar discursive strategies (e.g., building a separate collection for factual claims), generating results based on coded collections, adding cases to support analysis and producing the report.

The extracts selected are indicative of other similar trends found in the data. It is worth noting that NATO's response is much shorter than that of Putin, although this has not influenced the choice of analytic areas of focus as all aspects covered below feature in both Putin's speech and NATO's response. This project has received research ethical approval in line with the Research Ethics Policy and Procedures of Leeds Beckett University.

An important critical point about the analysis needs to be made here. What I describe below are rhetorical strategies that are deployed in these specific settings. A particular condition of these settings is that these unfold without interruption. This allows for certain factual claims to be made that are, upon further scrutiny, controversial. While at the analytic level I look to these rhetorical strategies, it is important to keep the wider context of the data in mind. The factual claims made by Putin should be critically questioned, such as claiming that a genocide was taking place in eastern Ukraine prior to the Russian invasion. The fact that Putin makes these claims in a setting where he cannot be interrupted is itself telling of the way he makes certain claims. While these facts cannot be questioned *in* the data that I demonstrate below, this is not to say that we should treat both sides of the argument as equally valid. I will return to this point in the discussion.

Analysis

Conflicting Versions of Events – Facts and Values

Political language orients to facts and values (Edelman, 1977). This section focuses on how both parties deploy factual claims to bolster their position, and the moral nature of these. In the first instance, there are several differences in terms of how these events, particularly in terms of who is responsible, are described.

Extract 1 – Putin

1 It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently
2 trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries
3 regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in
4 Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either
5 cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail,
6 while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our
7 protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I
8 said, is approaching our very border.

Extract 2 – NATO

1 Russia bears full responsibility for this conflict. It has rejected
2 the path of diplomacy and dialogue repeatedly offered to it by NATO
3 and Allies. It has fundamentally violated international law,
4 including the UN Charter. Russia's actions are also a flagrant
5 rejection of the principles enshrined in the NATO-Russia Founding
6 Act: it is Russia that has walked away from its commitments under
7 the Act.

What is important to note here is that these are not only not neutral descriptions, although expectedly both Putin and NATO orient to their own versions as neutral and morally desirable (see McVittie & Sambaraju, 2018), but there is, as part of this, an ideological dimension to how these facts and versions are described. These descriptions are embedded with factual claims (e.g., mention of time in extract 1), which treat the notion of 'facts' and 'truth' as rhetorical resources (see Demasi, 2019). In each statement one can see that the descriptive terms serve the ideological position of both factions – in the case of Russia it justifies war (although Putin will not describe it as such) in terms of NATO expanding (extract 1: 6) and Russia acting in

good faith to (extract 1: 1-4) in the face of dishonesty (extract 1: 5). Here, the proximity of a foreign military force near the national borders are treated as an inherent threat and a problem that warrants a military response. In the case of NATO, it condemns this war in terms of Russia proactively moving away from existing international agreements (extract 2: 1-4).

These descriptions orient to particular values. In the examples above these are most observable in the ascription of agency in terms of the hostilities. Russia is treating NATO's bad faith and eastward expansion as *casus belli*. NATO on Russia breaking international agreements. Fault is constructed through stating who started the hostilities, and in this sense agency and accountability are linked together. Intentionality and guilt can go hand in hand (Edwards, 2006) and both sides treat their opponent's actions as fully intentional. Here, then, both sides draw on everyday psychological language – who intended to do what, and what they did – to treat the other as morally culpable.

The deployment of facts has an additional value-laden element to it. The moral commentary that accompanies them have a particularly deontic aspect (see Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012), constructing a moral imperative to act in a particular way. Chiefly in the case of Putin's speech, there is a distinction between two types of values. These are values oriented towards a Russian audience, and there is an orientation to values that have a wider, international, appeal. This latter, particularly, is designed to justify and rationalise Russian belligerence in the war. In the case of NATO's response, the values are primarily oriented in the latter domain – the international ideological stage.

Extract 3 – Putin, Russian values

- 1 We cannot stay idle and passively observe these developments. This
- 2 would be an absolutely irresponsible thing to do for us.

Extract 3 orients to the moral imperative to act and is addressed to Putin's in-group through the reference of 'us' and 'we'. The mere observation – suggesting that one need not go out of their way to perceive reality – creates a salient moral imperative to behave in an appropriate way. For Putin, this means invading Ukraine. Resorting to a visual metaphor rhetorically constructs the object of observation as real, as this relies on the normative notion that one's senses are an accurate conveyor of reality. A visual metaphor of this kind treats its object as readily observable, and thus the observer is held accountable as treating the matter as out of the bound of dispute. Pairing the moral imperative with that of observation normalises the military action by treating it as a natural reaction and, thus, a morally right one. Through this, Putin treats his Russian audience as accountable by being required to agree and support the military action. Furthermore, this turns the tables of blame on Ukraine. Burke (2018) demonstrated how a British far-right organisation superficially supported the Jewish community and used this to display themselves as rational. A similar observation can be made here; Putin is constructing Ukraine as a threat to the people in eastern Ukraine and Russia, using this to rationalise Russian military action.

Extract 4 – Putin, international values

1 Freedom guides our policy, the freedom to choose independently our
2 future and the future of our children. We believe that all the
3 peoples living in today's Ukraine, anyone who want to do this, must
4 be able to enjoy this right to make a free choice.

Extract 5 – NATO, international values

1 The world will hold Russia, as well as Belarus, accountable for
2 their actions. We call on all states to condemn this unconscionable
3 attack unreservedly. No one should be fooled by the Russian
4 government's barrage of lies.

Extracts 4 and 5 show an orientation towards a more international audience. Extract 4 relies on a universally desirable moral value: freedom⁴. Putin would struggle to argue that these are exclusively Russian values and claiming to offer the freedom of choice to the Ukrainian people treats his use of values as an international one: he is doing something in line with a moral principle that anyone would be inclined to agree with. In extract 5, NATO acts, first, as a mouthpiece for the wider society by stating that the whole world will condemn the belligerents. Second, NATO is inviting condemnation of the attack, and, third, invites a position that treats Russian government as being dishonest. Both extracts describe their respective positions in a manner that invites international agreement by appealing to wider values. They present themselves, in contrast to each other's claims, to the wider international audience, as not accountable for the hostilities. Note again how, as mentioned above, Putin, with questionable motives, relies on the language of universal moral values to justify his actions.

These accounts are particularly oriented to the matter of being morally right. It is the conjunction of how things “really are” that suggests how these are to be understood; the very descriptions suggest the moral lens through which military action is justified or condemned, and, thus, vindicated. This suggests that not only are facts required to justify and account for war, but one needs to also tell the audience which facts are relevant (Demasi, 2019). Once again this shows an interesting parallel here between Putin's rhetoric and that of the far-right: a reliance on the ‘language of reasonableness’ to sanitise a more violent, hateful, position (e.g., Billig et al., 1988; Burke, 2018; Tileagă, 2005).

⁴ Note how the notion of ‘freedom’ can have the same rhetorical openness as ‘war’ and ‘peace’ can (see Gibson, 2018a).

Establishing Continuity

This section demonstrates how both parties rhetorically establish the continuity of their respective positions. This serves to normalise the responses of both sides, by treating these as standard behaviours rather than special responses – in other words, both sides manage their stake and interest (Potter, 1996) to come across as consistent. The rhetorical construction of continuity serves to justify and account for the actions of both Putin and NATO, as behaviours that Russia and NATO would ‘naturally’ engage in. This makes their respective positions come across as rational, typical, and reasoned rather than influenced by current events, and, by implication, the actions of their opposing faction. Both parties worked up two types of continuity; one establishing their behaviour prior to the conflict and going further, and another to establish their respective opponent’s belligerent acts. The latter serves to construct their opponent at moral fault. Both sides rely on colloquial psychological language – who has done what, how they behave, etc. – to justify and account for behaviour of large organisations. Psychological language of everyday behaviour, then, is drawn upon to justify international political behaviour⁵.

Extract 6 – Putin, Russian continuity

1 we made yet another attempt to reach agreement with the United
2 States and its allies

Throughout his speech, Putin makes several references to Russia attempting to behave diplomatically towards the west. Extract 6 and extract 1 (lines 1-4) are examples of this. By describing Russia’s actions as ‘patient’ and having carried out ‘yet another’ diplomatic outreach portrays Russia as acting in good faith towards a side that is portrayed as being unwilling to co-operate. By describing Russia’s actions in positive terms – patient and

⁵ Indeed, one of the core analytic principles of DP, inspired by CA, is that one can use ‘everyday’ psychological language to study discourse of all types (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards, 2005).

repeatedly attempting to reach agreements – portrays their opponents, USA and NATO⁶, as the root cause for the need for patience. The wording also implies that these are something that have been carried out across time. These characterise Russia as dispositionally inclined towards peaceful solutions, and the lack of success, because of this, comes not from Russia.

Extract 7 – Putin, Russian continuity

1 The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight
2 years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by
3 the Kiev regime.

In addition to establishing the continuity of Russian positive behaviour, this is contrasted with a continuity of negative behaviour from Russia's opponents. In the example in extract 7, the people Putin is claiming to protect have been subject to claimed abuse for eight years. The length of time sets the rhetorical tone of his claim: Putin is not escalating the war at a whim; he has waited for a considerable amount of time. As in the case above, this suggests certain dispositional features of both sides: patience from Russia and violence from Ukraine. This is also bolstered by how the opponents are described – describing the Ukrainian government as a 'regime' is a means of delegitimising their political status. Referring to the Ukrainian government as a regime also draws a moral boundary that denies, in addition to its legitimacy, the dignity of a sovereign government. This type of dehumanisation (see Tileagă, 2016) justifies and rationalises the escalation of hostilities towards Ukraine.

Extract 8 – NATO continuity

1 We will continue to provide political and practical support to
2 Ukraine as it continues to defend itself and call on others to do
3 the same. We reaffirm our unwavering support for the independence,
4 sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its
5 internationally recognised borders, including its territorial
6 waters. This principled position will never change.

⁶ In his address, Putin talks about USA and NATO in interchangeable terms.

having an axe to grind (ibid.). In this manner, reactions to the Russo-Ukrainian war are presented as a principled but unbiased. Such a presentation is a means for reifying each side's respective ideological positioning.

Character and Agency: Threats and Exhortations

The final section focuses on projected future action. In the case for Russia, it takes the form of a threat towards those who would try to intervene with the Russian army, Ukrainian or otherwise, if they are not left to act as they see fit, and the form of exhortation (e.g., encouraging Ukrainians to surrender). At this point of the speech, Putin begins to address the Ukrainian armed forces directly, referring to them as 'comrade officers'. This is shift of identified target audience contrasts with the rest of Putin's speech, where he addresses primarily Russian people. In the case of NATO, on account of a shorter response, there is a more implicit threat that takes the form of claimed consequences.

Extract 10 – Russia exhortation

1 I urge you to refuse to carry out their criminal orders. I urge you
2 to immediately lay down arms and go home. I will explain what this
3 means: the military personnel of the Ukrainian army who do this will
4 be able to freely leave the zone of hostilities and return to their
5 families.

The Russian threat and exhortation both take place in a specific part of Putin's speech, where he explicitly addresses the Ukrainian armed forces – calling them 'comrades' (shortly prior to extract 10). Addressing the Ukrainian armed forces in this way is a means of treating them in a familiar and friendly way, treating them as an ingroup. This presents his exhortation as something to be desired by those he is addressing. Using the word 'urge' (1) Putin calls for a quick response, by treating the matter as being short on time. The added promise of the soldiers

being able to return to their families is treated as a desirable matter, suggesting an absence of punishment from the Russian forces in the case of Ukrainian non-resistance. The exhortation, then, is not treated as quite sufficient by Putin; by adding a reward for compliance he also treats his request as one needing further justification. The justification orients to a non-violent scenario, soldiers at home and away from war, to argue for a military intervention supported by mutiny.

Extract 11 – Russian threat

1 I would now like to say something very important for those who may
2 be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside. No
3 matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create
4 threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia
5 will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you
6 have never seen in your entire history. No matter how the events
7 unfold, we are ready.

In the matter of the Russian threat, Putin makes the most obvious case shortly after this⁷ but has now moved to address the non-Ukrainian audience. These are referred to as ‘those’ (1) who are ‘outside’ (2) and ‘no matter who’ (2-3). The first term is an open one, meaning that the criteria for his threat is not a particular person or faction. This manages Putin’s neutrality by treating the object of this threat as a matter of agency for those tempted to interfere and avoids being seen as picking on any particular political enemy. The very term implies that it is not for the outsider – likely a reference to the West, USA and NATO, judging by the rest of Putin’s speech – to act on. Referring to the interferers as coming from ‘outside’, or that they could be anyone, further resists any notion that this matter bears relevance to anyone beyond Russia and Ukraine. Putin is drawing a boundary of relevance here: the conflict in Ukraine is relevant to Russia and Ukraine alone⁸. This rhetorical boundary allows him to make a case for a threat,

⁷ There are several other threats throughout his speech, but these are beyond the scope of the current analysis.

⁸ Arguably alluding to his political position, stated in other speeches, that denies Ukraine from any cultural or political independence from Russia.

because those who would intervene can now be defined as transgressors. This threat takes a rhetorical if/then formulation (Demasi, 2019). This, again, presents interference as a matter for the outsider, placing the agency away from Russia. While Putin is enacting an overt manner of discursive violence (see above), he is constructing it as a passive matter – for example, it is for the interferer to ‘stand in the way’ (3). Thus, the unspecified consequences (albeit expansive) strongly imply a violent and justified reaction from Russia. Such threat is constructing the transgressor, not Russia, as accountable for any future conflict. Furthermore, this threat serves a convenient political and military purpose. Compliance in line with Putin’s threat would also mean a concrete military advantage to the Russian army.

Extract 12 – NATO exhortation

1 We call on Russia to immediately cease its military assault, to
2 withdraw all its forces from Ukraine and to turn back from the path
3 of aggression it has chosen.

NATO, in turn, exhorts Russia to end the war. Referring to itself in the plural (1) works up an institutional identity and rhetorical authority to make such an exhortation. By demanding Russia to cease the hostilities treats Russia as the active, and thus accountable, agent in the war. This accountability is emphasised again with the phrase ‘turn back from the path of aggression’ (2-3). The phrase implies a dispositional trend for Russia to behave in a violent manner. Here, as above, culpability goes hand in hand with aggression. Whereas in the case of Russian threat, where blame is apportioned in accordance with action, here, instead, it is a matter of action and disposition.

Extract 13 – NATO threat

1 President Putin’s decision to attack Ukraine is a terrible strategic
2 mistake, for which Russia will pay a severe price, both economically
3 and politically, for years to come.

NATO's response contains one instance of a potential threat to Russia. It follows a similar if/then formulation as outlined above, but it is not presented as a hypothetical matter. Because NATO's threat is rooted in a concrete action, the threat of consequences is also more concrete on account that it responds to events that have already begun to unfold. However, while the threat of consequences is put in more certain, and long lasting, terms it is also constructed in non-violent terms. By specifying the consequences to be both economic (2) and political (3) the omission of a military response renders the threat non-violent – at least when compared to Putin's speech – and avoids the manner of discursive violence which Putin has not. NATO, also, has less need to do so on account that they have no need to sanitise any military action with their response.

It is worth returning to the deontic element of this subsection. Both threats and exhortations have a strong deontic role; they push for the addressee(s) to behave in a particular manner. Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012) demonstrated how deontics unfold in a face-to-face interaction. They note how “announcements can serve as means to get others to do things” (p.316), and we can extend this point to the context of this data. The deontic element of the data, then, serves as a tool for understanding how Putin and NATO seek to enforce compliance. In the case of NATO, also, the response serves as means for establishing the independence of NATO's own position regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war and, thus, constitutes a form of political resistance against Russia – where Putin's deontic work pushes for specific military advantage.

Conclusion

This paper presents an analysis of accountability and apportioning of blame in a public political sphere in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war by looking at Putin's declaration of escalation of hostilities and NATO's response. As a piece of DPP research this paper contributes to both political and peace psychology. For political psychology, there is tendency to treat itself as a primarily cognitive field, including in conflict resolution (Fisher et al., 2013) and the study of how long-term conflicts evolve over time (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2013), with contributions from evolutionary and genetic approaches (Tileagă, 2013). There is need to expand the purview of the discipline to include more widespread approaches (ibid.), and this paper contributes to this growing expansion. A similar issue is reflected in a peace psychology that takes an individualistic approach (Gibson, 2018a). Instead, the DPP approach used here looks at how the psychological thesaurus (Edwards, 2005) can expand our understanding of peace psychology. Moving away from an individualistic approach allows for a more nuanced psychological study of war and peace (Gibson, 2018a).

I have covered Vladimir Putin's speech from 24/02/22, recognised as something akin to a declaration of war even if Putin is at pains to avoid referring to it as such, and NATO's response the following day. Both factions argue and justify for their respective positions in terms of the war. For Putin, this was to justify and account for the Russian military intervention in Ukraine: for NATO it is to condemn Russian belligerence and to justify their support of the Ukrainian government and people.

Three rhetorical strategies were prominent in the data. First, the presentation of facts and values that portray each faction and their argument in desirable and reified terms. Both sides present their position as the natural and real one, suggesting a particular moral reading of the event. Second, both sides worked up a continuity of action for themselves and their opponent. This continuity took a particularly dispositional form: Russia and NATO behaved the way they did

because that is how they are regardless of current conflict. To this was tied the notion of agency, which carried implications of who was the belligerent one. Third, both sides talk about projected future action. Often taking the form of either exhortations or threats, Russia and NATO both promise consequences if their exhortations are not followed. These positions set the scene for future actions. Not just in the battlefield, but also in the arena of political communication where all sides fight for the rhetorical supremacy of their respective positions. It is worth to the point that there is a notable dimension in which the two data sources differ. Putin's speech took place prior to the escalation of hostilities, whereas the NATO response was released once this escalation was taking place. This renders Putin's threats pre-emptive, though hardly hypothetical.

Accountability is discursively rooted in the practices above. The analysis demonstrates a number of ways discursive violence (Gibson, 2018a) unfolds and showcases the rhetorical complexity of the language of war and peace. Using a discursive psychological analysis, I have shown how the tools of language can play a part in the construction, and resistance, of discursive violence. This paper contributes to the study of DPP by exploring the various ways that Vladimir Putin and NATO sought to justify or condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine to present their position as the morally desirable one – a readily observable ideological conflict between discourses that shows us that such ideologies are rooted in action rather than thought. I argue that just as humour (e.g., Billig, 2001) and rationality (e.g., Burke, 2018) can be used to mask the extremity and violence of prejudices (Billig et al., 1988) one can use the platform of (inter)national communications, in this case Putin's speech, to mask and justify the war taking place in Ukraine. As I mentioned earlier, ideology lies in actions rather than thoughts (Billig, 2002). The findings here reflect previous discursive work on the study of prejudice and denials of it. Similar rhetorical moves can be found in Putin's speech. We can look to denials

of prejudice as simultaneous expression of them and use this to understand how discursive violence takes place.

In the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the rhetorical constructions of moral fault (accountability) for the war, in addition to the justificatory work, also serve to sanitise and mask the violence that unfolds in Ukraine at present time. In the more localised context of the data, each side may be able to describe and deploy facts at their leisure without risk of interruptions. We should not take from this, however, that all factual claims are on equal (moral) footing. Upon closer scrutiny, much of Putin's claims are demonstrably untrue or distorted. Rather than treat the rhetorical strategy of factual claims as a matter of equal footing in moral terms – this is not the argument I put forward – we can see how certain claims can be made in the absence of a challenging voice. Outside of the context of Putin's speech, we can readily find for ourselves whether his factual claims stand the scrutiny of time and morality – and see that Putin's rhetorical justifications thinly veil a violence all too real.

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